

Isaiah 1:10-18

Hear the word of the Lord,

you rulers of Sodom!

Listen to the teaching of our God,

you people of Gomorrah!

What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices?

says the Lord;

I have had enough of burnt-offerings of rams

and the fat of fed beasts;

I do not delight in the blood of bulls,

or of lambs, or of goats.

When you come to appear before me,

who asked this from your hand?

Trample my courts no more;

bringing offerings is futile;

incense is an abomination to me.

New moon and sabbath and calling of convocation—

I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity.

Your new moons and your appointed festivals

my soul hates;

they have become a burden to me,

I am weary of bearing them.

When you stretch out your hands,

I will hide my eyes from you;
even though you make many prayers,
I will not listen;
your hands are full of blood.
Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean;
remove the evil of your doings
from before my eyes;
cease to do evil, learn to do good;
seek justice, rescue the oppressed,
defend the orphan, plead for the widow.

Come now, let us argue it out,
says the Lord:
though your sins are like scarlet,
they shall be like snow;
though they are red like crimson,
they shall become like wool.

Luke 19:1-10

He entered Jericho and was passing through it. A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax-collector and was rich. He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today." So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. All who saw it began to grumble and said, "He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner." Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, "Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much." Then Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost."

Sermon: By Invitation Only

It was supposed to be by invitation only. Everyone in Jericho had heard that Jesus was heading for Jerusalem, and of course he would pass through their town on the way.

The leading citizens had planned a small gathering – just a few established families, not a big crowd. They wanted the opportunity to introduce themselves and see if this teacher was really everything they had heard – clever, insightful, a prophet and healer. The guest list had been carefully reviewed – no one who would embarrass them with ill-informed questions, no one who was too needy, no one of a questionable reputation, and certainly no one who was a known Roman collaborator like that ostentatious chief tax collector Zacchaeus!

The man was insufferable. It was bad enough that they had to pay him off for every item of commerce that flowed through their town, but he was the last person you'd want to invite to a gathering like this – he was too eager, too unsophisticated, not a person who could break into the social elite and not a person you'd want to sit next to for a long meal.

And their worst suspicions about Zacchaeus were confirmed when Jesus came into town. This little man embarrassed them by ignoring all propriety and climbing a tree like a curious child. Maybe Jesus would not notice this unseemly and inappropriate behavior.

But Jesus does notice, and then the unthinkable: "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today."

The good people of Jericho are shocked – offended even. All who saw it began to grumble and said, "He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner."

The disciples could have told them – Jesus has done this before. He likes unlikely company - he shares his meals with sinners, he shows compassion to prostitutes, he touches lepers, he befriends tax collectors. He seems to have a soft spot for all those who would never be on the invitation only list of movers and shakers, of the well established or the up and coming.

It's sort of a mystery, this group he invites into his circle of fellowship – even those who have traveled with him, who have been sent out into the town and surrounding countryside to spread his word – why he picked these men and women is not open to easy explanation. His is free with his invitations, and this bigheartedness seems to insult some people – like the good citizens of Jericho they take offense at his generous hospitality and exclude themselves in the process.

I would suspect that even today the open welcome of Jesus is a mystery to the world and challenge to those in his circle of fellowship. I'm sure that many drive by this church and think of it as an "invitation only" kind of place. They are not sure they would be welcomed, not sure they would fit in. They don't know the protocol.

And for us, who already at the party, so to speak, it's not always easy to extend an invitation to "church." Separation of church and state, separation of church and – well just about everything else. And we don't want to be pushy or offend. If we saw a neighbor walk through the door we'd be the first to walk over and greet them – genuinely happy to see them – but to actually invite them – that feels different.

We should never become an invitation only congregation where certain people are welcome and others are excluded. But we need to understand that there are many in this community who will only walk through our doors if someone invites them. Zacchaeus would never have been brought into the circle of Jesus fellowship lacking those words of invitation Jesus spoke: "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today."

So when you leave church today, look up in the trees and see who's there waiting – no, luckily, we don't have to go looking in trees – but think of someone to whom you might extend a word of invitation – for Thanksgiving, for Christmas, for the long dark weeks of January. Let's follow the lead of the Lord and actively open the circle of our fellowship in the most inviting way possible.

"Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today."